DEAR PRESIDENTS, PRIME MINISTERS, FOREIGN MINISTERS, SECRETARIES OF STATE AND DEFENCE, AND DEFENCE MINISTERS OF CHINA, FRANCE, RUSSIA, UNITED KINGDOM, UNITED STATES.

P5 MEETING 29-31 JUNE 2011

OPERATING STATUS OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS SYSTEMS

An item that should be on the agenda when you meet in Paris at the end of June is the operating status of strategic nuclear weapons systems, especially in the US and Russia.

The next steps in nuclear disarmament are a logical topic for P5 discussions. The next step in nuclear disarmament is to decrease the role that nuclear weapons play in strategic planning by lowering their operational readiness, thereby significantly lowering the risk of an accidental apocalypse.

This item should be discussed within the context of a commitment to go to zero nuclear weapons and a nuclear weapons convention sooner rather than later. It also must be discussed in the immediate context of US and Russian steps after 'New START', which need to cover more than just tactical nuclear weapons, on which discussion now centres, but all systems kept in a state of high readiness for use because of their perceived vulnerability to pre-emption.

When elected, President Obama committed to negotiate with Russia to take nuclear weapons off high alert. It is time for this item to be at the top of the negotiating agenda.

Operating status of nuclear weapon systems is a topic that, while leading toward and facilitating progress to the elimination of nuclear weapons and an NWC, has an independent importance all of its own.

At the same time, it concerns all of the P5 governments, (and others), and is a legitimate topic of interest for the entire world, as noted in the final declaration of the last (2010) NPT Review Conference.

It has been argued by some that a lowering in the operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems is the single step that would do most, for the least effort, in decreasing the probability of complete global catastrophe as a result of inadvertent nuclear war bought about by malfunction, miscalculation, or human error.

An article in a 2008 edition of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists entitled 'minimising the risk of human extinction' places it as the highest priority action to be followed immediately by the complete elimination of nuclear weapon systems.
The use, by miscalculation or malfunction, of even a small fraction of the US or Russian strategic arsenals (including 2000 launch-ready, high-alert warheads) would terminate not just civilisation but would threaten the elimination of most humans and many other complex forms of life, as shown by recent (2006) studies.

The incineration of urban areas totalling 100 times the size of Hiroshima's incinerated area in firestorms (possible with as few as 20 modern warheads) would produce a stratospheric soot layer that would cause catastrophic climate change, and catastrophic damage to the Earth's protective ozone layer. Worldwide famine would inevitably follow, claiming in a decade, more victims than all the famines of recorded history combined.

The use of the on-alert arsenals of the US and Russia would cause global ice-age conditions.

The International Commission for Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament (ICNND) devotes considerable space in its report to the issue of lowering the operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems, remarking that the risk of accidental nuclear war is 'not a fantasy but a terrifying possibility'.

The ICNND, the Blix commission of 2006, and the 1996 Canberra Commission all strongly urged the lowering of nuclear weapons system operating status.

A number of UN resolutions include reference to the need to lower the operational readiness of nuclear weapon systems. These include the Japan-Australia sponsored resolution on 'United Action Towards the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons', which is voted for by all of the P5, and receives overwhelming support from governments worldwide, and the Chile/Malaysia/New-Zealand/Nigeria/Switzerland sponsored resolution on Operational Readiness of Nuclear Weapons Systems which was most recently adopted by UNGA last October 157-3. Of the P5, China voted yes to it, Russia abstained while the US, France and the UK voted 'no'.

However the France and UK 'No' vote was explained by saying that those countries have already lowered the operational readiness of their nuclear weapon systems. (The UK says it did so in 1998, changing the 'notice to fire' of its submarine - based nuclear weapons from 'minutes' to 'days'.) If this is so, the UK and France should use the P5 discussions to persuade the US and Russia to maintain their nuclear forces in a similar state of alert to those of France and the UK. (and China).

We hope and trust that P5 leaders will give this topic the high significance it deserves.

Your attention is also drawn to letters sent by the NGO community to the US Congress and the Russian Duma, and by a number of Russian former senior military and policy experts to the US Congress and Duma Committees on Foreign Affairs and Defence.
Signed

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